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ABSTRACT

The first and last essays of 209 randomly selected students who had received a passing grade in English Composition I at Bucks County Community College during Fall, 1976, were evaluated at the end of the semester by a committee of English teachers from other institutions. The committee assessed improvement in relation to several instructional objectives: content, unity, coherence, sentence structure, mechanics, word usage, and diction. Results showed that: (1) over 73% demonstrated substantial improvement in meeting instructional objectives as well as in writing polish: (2) 20% demonstrated only slight improvement or improvement that was negated by regression: and (3) 5% demonstrated regression. Improvement appeared most often in coherence, while improvement in mechanics and diction was noticeably lower than for the other objectives. Additional comments made by the committee pointed out that, despite improvements, students continued to make heavy use of periodic, declarative sentences and literal, rather than figurative, language. The study report is appended by a Department of Language and Literature report detailing the methods of the study: a copy of the instructions given to instructors and readers: a listing of theme titles: and a detailed presentation of findings. (JP)

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BUCKS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

DETERMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

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Artic le prepared by Dr. Charles E. Rollins with information gathered from research report made by Dr. Louis E. Murphy, Professor, Department of Language and Literature.

BUCKS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Determining the Effectiveness
of Freshman Composition

How many times have you been asked, "Why can't you improve writing skills?" And how many times have you said, "We do ... but I don't have any proof." At Bucks County Community College the faculty was convinced that we had a sound English Composition course. They had developed syllabi for English Composition I with carefully detailed objectives and evaluative criteria. Yet, the questions remained. In order to obtain a more objective opinion, the faculty came up with the following plan:

On the first day of the Fall Semester, 1976, each full-time instructor announced to his or her classes that everyone would write at least eleven themes during the semester and that the last theme, to be written for the Department, would be evaluated but would not be returned. (The nature of this departmental study was not disclosed to the students because it might influence their writing.)

During the first week of the semester, each full-time instructor assigned to all of his or her students in CMP I a multi-paragraphed expository these to be written in or

out of class at the discretion of the instructor, as long as he or she was consistent, on one of several topics chosen by the departmental Ad Hoc Committee for the Determination of Student Improvement in CMP I from topics submitted voluntarily by members of the Department in the spring, 1976. This paper was to be written before the student received any instruction on writing or any corrected material (i.e., exercises or an in-class theme) from the instructor. The Ad Hoc Committee set a deadline for the essays to be handed in to the Department Office, where the department secretaries and an appropriate number of department members not currently teaching CMP I (selected by the Ad Hoc Committee) drew out, according to the random sampling system 30% of the papers to be studied. These essays were duplicated after the instructor's and student's names were eliminated from each theme and a code was substituted. This duplication was done as quickly as possible to allow prompt return of the papers to the instructor.

During the last week of the semester, each full-time instructor again assigned to all of his or her students in CMP I a multi-paragraphed <u>expository</u> theme on one of several topics determined by the departmental Ad Hoc Committee and not directly related to an essay in a reader. Those instructors who had assigned an in-class theme for the first paper would

again assign an out-of-class theme. The Ad Hoc Committee set a deadline for the essays to be handed in to the Department Office, where the secretaries and department members extracted the papers written by the students whose essays were sampled during the first week of the semester. These papers were duplicated after the instructor's and student's names had been eliminated from each of these and a code substituted. Each instructor submitted, with the final essays, a list of students failing his or her class, so that those students' papers would not be considered. The reasons behind this exclusion were: 1) Most students who fail CMP I do so because they have regularly cut class and neglected to hand in assignments. Hence, the failure is their fault and not the instructor's. 2) To study the papers of those few students who have submitted all of their written work and have still failed would not help to indicate the ways in which students have progressed in CMP I, the purpose of the study. (In brief, students who have not seriously attempted the course and who have received a failing grade have already demonstrated their lack of progress.)

At the end of the semester, the first and last themes written by 30% (or fewer, if some of the students had failed or withdrawn) were read by a committee of three readers who

were nominated by the Departmental Ad Hoc Committee and selected by the President. The readers divided the essays among themselves, making sure that a student's first and last essays were read by the same person.

The readers employed by the College were English teachers from three other community colleges, one in Pennsylvania and two in New Jersey. They were supplied with a list of objectives for CMP I and used them for evaluation of the themes. The sampling consisted of 418 essays; that is the first and last essays of 209 students. Multiple copies were made of all themes so that every theme would be read by two readers. The report of the readers indicated that substantial progress had resulted in the writing of the students over the course of a semester of instruction.

Progress	73%+	showed substantial improvement in meeting instructional objectives and improvement in writing polish[1]

[1]The course instructional objectives (content, unity, coherence, sentence structure, mechanics, work usage, and diction) made no mention of polish. However, the report of the readers noted polish as a consideration because those students who started out the semester as good writers did finish as more polished writers.

Bimodal Movement	20%+	slight improvement shown or improvement cancelled out by areas of regression
Regression	5%	regression from instructional objectives during the semester

The report also indicated that improvement in coherence appeared in the greatest number of samples, with word usage, sentence structure, unity, and content following closely.

Naturally, the report mentioned weaknesses as well as strengths. The number of samples showing improvement in mechanics and diction were noticably lower than for the other objectives. In addition, the report pointed out that, although marked improvement was shown in the correction of sentence structure faults, many of the students employed almost exclusively periodic declarative sentences which would have been improved by more use of subordination. Too, the students relied heavily on literal language, with little use of figurative language. The Department feels that constructive criticism such as this will be extremely useful in making the composition course more effective.

Since there are so many criteria involved in the evaluation of writing ability, no method for judging the success of a writing course could be completely satisfactory. However,

the system described above, using qualified outside readers holistically comparing first and last themes, with each theme read by two readers, certainly has much to recommend it.

STUDY TO DETERMINE PROGRESS IN WRITING IN COMPOSITION I

Conducted by the
Department of Language and Literature

Background

Two years ago the Board of Trustees of Bucks County Community College and the college administration asked the English faculty of the Department of Language and Literature to study the writing progress made by students enrolled in Composition I at the college. The department subsequently formed an ad hoc committee to develop a study that would ascertain the kind and extent of student writing progress in composition. After considering a variety of possible study formats, along with pedagogical and cost-implications, the ad hoc committee proposed to the department for approval a study format with guidelines for implementation. The proposal was accepted by the department, and is reflected in the outline of the study that follows.

Premise

There was unanimous agreement both on the ad hoc committee and within the department that only actual student writing samples, as opposed to "objective" or multiple-choice testing,[1] would validly yield the information sought: i.e., does the student actually write a better expository essay at the end of Composition I than when first entering the course.

Format

Using a random sampling pattern provided by the college computer center, the committee sought to sample approximately one-third of the students enrolled in day sections of Composition I taught by the full-time faculty. A large initial sampling was made to allow for a statistically-valid sampling base after withdrawals and failures were accounted for at the end of the semester. Neither instructor nor student nor any faculty member nor administrator had knowledge of which students were chosen according to student number by the computer random sample program. The only condition applied was that the sampling be evenly distributed over all the day sections of Composition I taught by full-time faculty. This meant, depending on classs enrollment, that six to eight students anonymously provided the sampling base initially in each class sampled.

[1] Cf. Barbara Apstein, "Deficiencies of the CLEP Writing Examination" College Composition and Communication, 26 (1975), 350-355.

For purposes of a valid comparison the committee chose to use the first and a final additional student essay (I and II) of the semester. Since the course is viewed by the department as being primarily a skills course and not a content course, the committee devised 5 general essay topics to be used in all sections, and with different essay topics to be used for the first and last essays.[2] The flexibility of choice in essay topics to be used by the students was predicated on the following considerations:

1. It is educationally sound to allow students a choice of essay topics so that they may draw upon their own experiences and interests

2. Faculty choice of text to be used in the various sections of Composition I precluded narrowly-based essay topics

3. The committee wished to avoid any encouragement of a faculty member orienting his teaching during the semester toward a specific essay topic

4. The committee also wanted to preclude the possibility of any kind of coaching or use of extra teaching sessions just prior to the final essay to prepare students in a manner not ordinarily used in a class.

To avoid infringement upon the individual instructors' teaching strategy, both in-class and out-of-class essay assignments were permitted. In order to preserve a basis for valid comparison, however, an instructor had to agree to use either in-class or out-of-class assignments consistently for both the first and final essays. This distinction has been indicated on the essays.

Readers

The committee proposed that college instructors trained in English and without connection to the department or the college be employed to read the student essays produced by the random sampling. Each essay is to receive a reading by two readers. The readers themselves should be selected from area community colleges with comprehensive curricula and with student profiles similar to those of Bucks County Community College. After a preliminary meeting of readers at Bucks with the department chairman to receive their charge, and after approximately two weeks for reading of the essays, the readers are to reconvene at Bucks to prepare their report with conclusions on the extent and kind of student progress in writing in Composition I. This report is to be made to the chairman of the Department of Language and Literature.

[2]The essay topics were released by the committee to the faculty only several days in advance of the assigned essays.

Course Writing Objectives

The readers are expected to measure expository writing progress of the students against the writing objectives of Composition I as contained in the course syllabus. These writing objectives, stated as elements and non-ranked, are as follows:

unity
coherence
sentence structure
diction
clarity
economy in usage
mechanics

Ordinarily, the department expects to strive for approximately 500 words in the expository essay, although in in-class essay assignments experience shows that many fewer essays reach that expectation.

Charge to the Readers

I In your review of the expository essays resulting in the random sampling, measured against the writing objectives of Composition I, please remark upon the following:

1. those areas of the course objectives in which the greatest improvement has occurred; the least improvement has occurred

2. the number of final essays that show over all progress; that show neither progress nor regression; that actually show regression

II The committee wished to know whether learning of expository writing skills has indeed occurred in Composition I--based on your evaluation of the sampling of student essays read by you.

III Upon reconvening at the college on or about June 17, 1977, prepare jointly a report addressing items I and II for the chairman of the Department of Language and Literature.

THE AD HOC COMMITTEE'S REPORT TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE ON A TECHNIQUE TO DETERMINE STUDENT IMPROVEMENT IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION I

On the first day of the Fall Semester, 1976, each full-time instructor will announce to his classes that everyone will write eleven themes this semester and that the eleventh theme, to be written for the Department, will be evaluated but will not be returned. (The nature of this departmental study should not be disclosed to the students because it might influence their writing.)

During the first class meeting, each full-time instructor will assign to all of his students in CMP I a 500-word, out-of-class, expository essay, on one of several topics to be chosen by the departmental Ad Hoc Committee for the Determination of Student Improvement in CMP I from topics submitted voluntarily by members of the Department in the spring, 1976. This paper must be handed in before the student has received any instruction on writing or any corrected material (i.e., exercises or an in-class theme) from the instructor. (See attached page, "Alternatives.") The Ad Hoc Committee will set a deadline for the essays to be handed in to the Department Office, where members of the Committee and Secretary Kay Vehling will draw out 30% of the papers to be studied, according to the random sampling system. These essays will be duplicated after the instructor's and student's names have been eliminated from each theme and a code has been substituted. This duplication will be done as quickly as possible to allow prompt return of the papers to the instructor.

During the last week of the semester, each full-time instructor will again assign to all of his students in CMP I a 500-word, out-of-class, expository essay, on one of several topics to be determined by the departmental Ad Hoc Committee and not to be directly related to an essay in a reader. Once again, the Ad Hoc Committee will set a deadline for the essays to be handed in to the Department Office, where the Committee and Kay Vehling will extract the papers written by the students whose essays were sampled during the first week of the semester. These papers will be duplicated after the instructor's and student's names have been eliminated from each theme and a code has been substituted. Each instructor will submit, with the final essays, a list of students failing his class, so that those students papers will not be considered. The reasons behind this exclusion are: 1) Most student who fail

CMP I do so because they have regularly cut class and neglected to hand in assignments. Hence, the failure is their fault and not the instructor's. 2) To study the papers of those few students who have submitted all of their written work and have still failed will not help to indicate the ways in which students have progressed in CMP I, the purpose of the study.

At the end of the semester, the themes written by the 30% of the students sampled will be read by a committee of three readers who will be nominated by the departmental Ad Hoc Committee from area community colleges, selected by the President and/or Dean and/or Chairman, and paid for their work. (The alternative to external readers would be qualified readers from within BCCC--e.g., Richard Bullock, Beverly Cohen, Susan Simkanich, Jay Byer, Guy Petrozziello, Thomas Cunningham--who would also be paid for their work.) The readers will divide the essays among themselves, making sure that a student's first and last essays are read by the same person.

The readers will not have to put a letter grade on each paper, but they must submit one written report indicating whether the students in CMP I have made overall improvement and discussing the nature and quality of the improvement. Before their reading begins, the evaluators will be presented with the following list of the writing objectives of CMP I (from the 1975 Periodic Review) and will be told that each skill on the list is to be weighted equally in a consideration of the essays.

> Writing: Through adequate practice in writing, the student acquires and demonstrates the following skills:
>
> 1. Recognition, development, and articulation of thesis in a unified, restricted, and precise statement.
>
> 2. Recognition and use of appropriate content and form to convey the purpose with clarity.
>
> a. Content
> --The student will provide the needed amount of specificity (accumulation of detail, exemplification, analogy, reasoning) and appropriate generalization, employing logical rigor.
>
> b. Form
> --Unity: all elements that make up the writing will work harmoniously toward the single end of developing the writer's theme.
> --Coherence: through organization, transition, and consistent point of view, the elements will hold together.
> --Sentence structure will be correct and varied to suit the purpose.
> --Diction: the writer will use language suitable to a defined audience.

--Mechanics: grammar, punctuation, and spelling will be correct.

Department Chairman Robert Bense will present this proposal to President Rollins and Dean Hall for their approval. If any qualatative changes are requested, he will consult with the Ad Hoc Committee before consenting to them.

Respectively submitted on February 2, 1976 by the Ad Hoc Committee for the Determination of Student Improvement in CMP I.

Katherine Rankin, Chairperson
Robert Bense
Annette Conn
Louis Murphy
Gene Penland

"Alternatives"

The Ad Hoc Committee recognizes that good reasons exist for assigning the essays to be studied as in-class rather than out-of-class work. Hence, it presents this summary of advantages and requests that the Department vote to determine which type of theme to assign.

The Out-Of-Class Theme:

Students usually do better when they are writing without a time limit. They have leisure to ponder, to organize carefully, and to revise. CMP I does not have as a purpose the teaching of how to write under pressure. Hence, in-class themes might be a misrepresentation of the course's aims and the students' work.

The In-Class Theme:

In-class themes will allow the Department to have more control over the study. Problems with lateness and plagiarism will not arise. The project can be readily taken care of very early in the first week of class, before much instruction has been given. For the last theme of the semester, students might resent devoting out-of-class time and energy during the busy last week of school to a paper they will not get back at all, and thus might write a poor paper and not reveal much improvement, yet they certainly cannot object to fifty minutes of writing during classtime. Finally, although the out-of-class themes are usually better pieces of writing than the in-class themes, the purpose of the study is to measure improvement, and marked improvement is usually obvious when the first and last in-class themes are compared.

25 May 1976

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON STUDENT PROGRESS IN CMP110

FIRST IN-CLASS THEME:

1. What do you regard as "work"?

2. Why do you think _____ is the best movie you have seen in the past two years? (Fill in the blank with the name of the movie you want to write about.)

3. Classify types of students you went to high school with.

FINAL IN-CLASS THEME:

1. If you were to have life to live over again, whom or what would you now choose to be born as?

2. Define and discuss traditional male and female roles.

3. Do you consider television beneficial or harmful to us?

FIRST OUT-OF-CLASS THEME:

1. To what extent should a candidate's personal life be taken into consideration when selections are made for elected office?

2. What must a human being do in order to be specifically human and not a machine or an animal?

3. What do you mean by "success"?

FINAL OUT-OF-CLASS THEME:

1. Suppose a medical research discovered a drug that would prolong our lives to 200 years and would allow women to bear children until the age of 100. What should he do and why? Discuss all the implications of the choice.

2. What do you mean by "freedom"?

3. Explore the recurrent images of women in the media and test them against your own experience.

RESULTS OF A STUDY OF THE BUCKS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPOSITION I PROGRAM, JUNE 1977

INTRODUCTION

Learning of expository writing skills has clearly occurred in the Composition I classes at Bucks County Community College. The reading of a random sampling of student themes, in which final essays were compared with first essays, revealed that more than half the essays showed overall progress. As measured against the specific teaching objectives of the Department of Language and Literature, student writing showed the greatest improvement in coherence, with improvement shown also in several other areas, including mechanics, content, and sentence structure. Although improvement in specific areas was uneven, and although very poor writers did not become excellent writers over the course of the semester, it appears from a majority of the samples that the department is meeting its objectives.

BACKGROUND SUMMARY

With the help of the college computer center, an ad hoc committee of the Department of Language and Literature at Bucks County Community College randomly sampled approximately one-third of the students enrolled in day sections of Composition I taught by full-time faculty. Neither instructors nor students knew which student essays would be selected. Using five general essay topics and allowing both for student choice among the prescribed topics and instructor choice in the use of in-class or out-of-class assignments, students' first and final essays in the semester were compared. Reading, comparing, and evaluating were completed by composition instructors selected from area community colleges. This report outlines the results notes by the three readers.

CRITERIA AND EVALUATION

Readers, measuring final essays against first essays, examined the writing for overall improvement and for improvement in the specific areas of content and form. Essays were particularly evaluated in terms of specificity and generalization with regard to content, and for unity, coherence, sentence structure, diction, clarity, mechanics, and economy in usage. Results are summarized in Table 1.

More than half the final themes revealed improvement. Of 209 essays, 111 (53%) showed overall progress, that is, improvement in one or more areas; 88 (42%) showed neither progress nor regression; 10 (5%) showed actual regression.

The greatest amount of learning seemed to take place in students' recognition of the need to put ideas together in an organized fashion. Although many students included a thesis in their first themes, most did not articulate a clear and precise thesis, and many went on to write essays which were only tangentially related to their theses. In the general area of content, 44% showed improvement. Most improvement occurred in the use of specificity--student use of detail, example, etc.--to support the thesis. Fifty-nine percent showed improved coherence, especially in organization, and 40% showed improvement in unity.

Similar improvement was seen in the three areas of mechanics, sentence structure and paragraph structure. Sentence structure improved in 49%. For the most part, improvement occurred in the correction of sentence structure faults rather than in the varying of sentence patterns. In these cases, students showed a noticeable decline in the number of fragments and

run-on/comma-spliced sentences. Some students began the semester writing a series of one and two-sentence paragraphs, and some started out writing the whole essay as a single paragraph, some paragraphs running to approximately 500 words. Improvement in these cases was easily noted. Twenty-nine percent of the students showed improvement in mechanics. In these cases, errors of grammar, punctuation and spelling declined generally from first to final essay. In addition, 31% of the themes revealed noticeable improvement in diction, and 51% showed improvement in clarity and economy in usage.

In style, most of the sentence structure was traditional, largely following the S-V-O pattern in periodic, declarative sentences. Not as much subordination appears in the writing as might be expected at the conclusion of a freshmen composition course. Language is almost exclusively literal, the very few touches of figurative language usually found in the stronger papers. While these comments indicate that the writing was not sophisticated, it was nonetheless competent.

OBJECTIVE	% of sample showing improvement
Content	44%
Unity	49%
Coherence	59%
Sentence Structure	49%
Mechanics	29%
Word Usage	51%
Diction	31%

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that all students did not improve in all areas. It is also true that instructors did not, in general, turn bad writers into good writers. In fact, 42% of the essays showed neither improvement nor regression. This figure means several things: that those writers whose initial attempts would discourage even the most optimistic instructor remained poor writers for the most part, even though slight improvement was shown; that good writers remained good (between 1/3 and 1/2 of the 42% defining 'no change' describes the writing of students who entered the course writing at a level which already met course objectives), and showed relatively little improvement except in overall polish; and that some writers gained in certain areas (this is reflected in the breakdown in Table 1), but regressed in others, thus cancelling each other out. Students began the semester at various levels and remained at various levels at semester's end, but results seem to indicate that the department is reaching its objectives to a significant degree, that students in the Composition I classes at Bucks County Community College have made progress in improvement of their writing skills.

Submitted by department examiners:

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